NEWS RELEASE

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EXPERIMENTAL MANAGEMENT OF NORTHERN PIKE AND SMALLMOUTH BASS CONTINUES IN COLORADO AND UTAH

LAKEWOOD, Colo. – The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program (Recovery Program) has begun its third year of concerted efforts to manage northern pike and smallmouth bass in certain river reaches where scientific evidence shows that these nonnative fish species threaten the survival of the endangered humpback chub, bonytail, Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker.

The experimental nonnative fish management research studies are designed to determine if management efforts are effective in reducing the numbers of targeted nonnative fishes in sections where they were removed; if endangered and other native fishes will increase in response to nonnative fish reductions; and where and how nonnative fishes are getting into the critical habitat sections of the upper basin.

Efforts will expand from last year to include additional river sections, work crews and removal trips. From April through October, biologists will work in 565 miles of the Colorado, Yampa, Green and Duschesne rivers in the states of Colorado and Utah. Depending on the river reach, they will target smallmouth bass and/or northern pike for removal and relocation to area fishing ponds wherever appropriate and practical.

“With the exception of the Yampa River, most of the northern pike populations in the Upper Colorado River Basin appear to be under control,” Recovery Program Director Robert Muth said. “Because of declines in native and endangered fishes, the abundance of northern pike and smallmouth bass in the Yampa River remains a big concern.

“We are trying to establish a buffer between Hayden and Craig, Colorado, that will reduce the number of northern pike from entering Yampa River critical habitat where they can threaten the survival of the endangered fishes. We also want to prevent northern pike from moving into the Green River in Utah, where many of our native and endangered fish nursery habitats are located.”

Data since 2002 show a significant increase in the number of smallmouth bass.

“Throughout the Upper Colorado River Basin, smallmouth bass have proven to be a much bigger problem than previously anticipated,” said Recovery Program Nonnative Fish Coordinator Pat Nelson. “Although researchers removed large numbers of smallmouth bass in the Colorado, Green and Yampa rivers last year, it’s too early to tell if those reductions in numbers will persist over time, or if native and endangered fish populations will respond as predicted.”

In Colorado, this year’s smallmouth bass research will focus primarily on removal in sections of the Colorado and Yampa rivers. Larger smallmouth bass will be collected in the Yampa River and relocated to Elkhead Reservoir.

“Although Elkhead Reservoir is presently closed to public access for safety reasons during enlargement construction, we will continue to relocate smallmouth bass there in an attempt to restore a quality fishery when the reservoir reopens,” said Eric Hughes, statewide aquatic wildlife manager, Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW). “We remain dedicated to providing anglers with high-quality fishing opportunities while we work to recover endangered and other native fish populations.”

In addition to helping the Recovery Program with removal efforts, the CDOW is conducting studies to determine where smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, other centrarchids (sunfish species) and northern pike in the river are coming from.

“CDOW’s research is critical to helping us understand what it will take to manage these species in the river system long-term,” Recovery Program Director Robert Muth said.

A third nonnative fish species -- channel catfish -- also poses a serious threat to the endangered Colorado River fishes and has been the subject of past research. In 2003, capture methods proved inadequate for effective removal in most areas and expanding smallmouth bass populations were considered a greater threat. As a result, channel catfish research will occur this year only in Yampa Canyon where effective removal has been demonstrated.

This year’s nonnative fish management effort is a collaborative effort among the Recovery Program, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and biologists from Colorado State University.

Nonnative fish management is only one of several actions the Recovery Program is implementing to recover the endangered fishes. Efforts are also ongoing to provide river flows, restore habitat, construct fish ladders and screens, produce and stock endangered fish and monitor results.

Established in 1988, the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program is a voluntary, cooperative program whose purpose is to recover the endangered fishes while water development proceeds in accordance with federal and state laws and interstate compacts. For more information, call 303-969-7322, ext. 227 or visit the Recovery Program’s website: coloradoriverrecovery.fws.gov.

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